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ABSTRACT

Three groups of teachers (10 regular teachers talking to 10 normally hearing students, 10 teachers of the deaf using oral communication to oral deaf children, and teachers of the deaf talking and signing with children taught through a manually coded English system) were videotaped in spontaneous conversation and a storytelling task. Children were matched for language age. Results confirmed the hypothesis of significantly greater use of idiomatic language during spontaneous communication with hearing children than with deaf children. In the storytelling task, however, no difference was found between groups, suggesting that when teachers are free to select the language they will use, they choose to omit idiomatic language. Findings further suggested that while use of direct requests may be determined by cognitive-social variables, use of indirect requests may be determined by linguistic level. The prediction of greater difference in the two groups' use of idiomatic language than in their use of indirect requests was also confirmed. Significantly less idiomatic language was used in talk to total communication deaf children than to normally hearing or auditory-oral groups. (CL)

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The Use of Nonliteral Language in Talk to Deaf Children

Laurie Newton, Ph.D.

The deficient English language abilities of deaf children have been ascribed to a number of causes, such as the difficulty of learning this language through a profoundly impaired auditory system, unskilled or nonsystematic teaching, or inappropriate teaching methodologies. This study examined a particular feature of language addressed to deaf children--use of nonliteral language--to explore the hypothesis that a more primary source of incompetence in deaf language users may be the fact that they are frequently not exposed to many aspects of the language which they are expected to learn.

Researchers have recently begun to suggest that modifications in linguistic input may be a source of the language deficiency so commonly observed in deaf children. Reich and Bick found that only 20% of teachers' fingerspelled letters were formed as they are represented on the fingerspelling chart. Kluwin concluded that when teachers are faced with the multiple demands of the classroom, function takes precedence over form. And Marmor and Pettito found that less than 10% of all teacher utterances were executed in accord with rules of English grammar. They concluded that the recent shift to manual English, in an effort to overcome the nonvisibility of language through lipreading, may offer no greater accessibility to language than was available through oral modalities. In contrast, other studies have suggested that exposure to good English sign models enhances children's acquisition of English. Crandall found that a good predictor of children's use of inflectional morphemes was the mothers' use of these morphemes. Raffin, Davis, and Gilman concluded that the main contribution to deaf children's use of signed inflectional morphemes was their length of exposure to a manual English system.

Two general influences may lead adults to modify their talk to deaf children. Adults might modify or reduce their language as an accommodation to their personal perception of the deaf child's language learning needs. For example, if a group of deaf children were found to have equivalent language abilities to a group of hearing children, but adults spoke differently to the deaf children than to the hearing children, this would suggest that the adult perceived the needs of the deaf children differently. A second reason that adults might alter their language could be accommodations they make in an effort to communicate through total communication, either because of limited sign skills or due to inherent difficulties involved in trying to represent the English language through a visual-manual modality. If the use of total communication leads to modifications or reductions in language input, differences should be observed when comparing talk to auditory-oral and talk to total communication children.

The present study investigated teachers' use of nonliteral language when talking to deaf and hearing children. This area was selected because it reflects an area of difficulty commonly attributed to deaf children: that their language is concrete. Perhaps this deficiency, which has typically been ascribed to problems inherent in deafness, may be partially explained by a lack of exposure to this type of language.

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Two types of nonliteral language which are common in talk to young hearing children were observed: idiomatic language (such as "I ran out of cookies," "Make sure you finish that.") and indirect requests (e.g. "I need some milk." "That ball is mine."). The first prediction made was that talk to deaf children would contain significantly fewer instances of nonliteral language than talk to hearing children of essentially comparable linguistic ability. A finding such as this would be attributed to differences in perception regarding the language learning needs of hearing and deaf children.

Second, a greater discrepancy was predicted between the deaf and hearing groups' use of idiomatic language than in their use of indirect requests. This would be explained by the different psycho-linguistic capacities required to comprehend these two structures. In order to understand idiomatic language, one must learn its precise interpretation, as the words bear little semantic correspondence to the intended underlying meaning of the expression. Contextual cues too offer little support to comprehension. Indirect requests are not composed of nonliteral words. Instead, their syntactic structure is misleading. So the child can use the literal lexical items, combined with contextual and logical support, to interpret the meaning. The difference between these two structures is further exaggerated when sign language is used. Signs often contain some aspect of a word's meaning. When the sign is then used to encode a nonliteral meaning, it still contains the meanings from the literal interpretation (e.g. take a bath; run out of paper). Consequently, most adults strongly resist the use of nonliteral signs.

In order to observe the effects of sign language use upon use of nonliteral language, the third hypothesis compared teachers using total communication to deaf children to teachers who used only oral language when communicating with deaf children. Due to the previously described encoding problems which develop when using manually coded English (or English sign language), it was predicted that the total communication group would use less idiomatic language than the oral group. No difference was predicted in the two groups' use of indirect requests, however, because signs are not used in a nonliteral way for that structure, so adults should feel less inclined to modify.

Three groups of teachers were videotaped as they communicated with children in two tasks: first, a spontaneous conversation, and then a storytelling task which was heavily weighted with nonliteral language to encourage its use. The groups included:

(1) 10 regular teachers talking to 10 normally hearing children,
(2) 10 teachers of the deaf using oral communication to oral deaf children, and
(3) 10 teachers of the deaf talking and signing with 10 children taught through some system of manually coded English.

The children were matched for language age, the hearing children therefore had a mean chronological age of 2;6 (range 2;4--3;0) and the deaf children had a mean chronological age of 7;6 (range 5;11--9;3).

The results confirmed the hypothesis of significantly greater use of idiomatic language during spontaneous communication with hearing children than with deaf children. In the storytelling task, however, no difference was found between groups. This suggests that when teachers are free to select the language they will use, they choose to omit idiomatic language.

The comparison of teachers' use of indirect requests to hearing and deaf children revealed no significant differences. However when direct requests were compared, talk to the younger hearing children included greater usage than did talk to the deaf children. This difference was attributed to the lower cognitive and social levels of the hearing children, requiring increased directing of attention to the task, greater talk about actions on objects in the here-and-now as opposed to the discussion which was more common with the deaf children, and the tendency to replace commands and directions with polite suggestion when communicating with the older deaf children. It appears that use of direct requests may be determined by cognitive-social variables, while use of indirect requests may be determined by linguistic level.

The prediction of greater difference in the two groups' use of idiomatic language than in their use of indirect requests was also confirmed. This supports the notion that teachers have greater difficulty with the nonliteralness of idiomatic language than with the nonliteralness of indirect requests.

For the final set of comparisons, the deaf group was subdivided into two: talk to auditory-oral deaf children and talk to total communication deaf children. Comparison of group means revealed no differences in teachers' use of idiomatic language when talking to hearing children or to auditory-oral deaf children. However, significantly less idiomatic language was used in talk to total communication deaf children. Reduced use of idiomatic language by teachers who use total communication may be explained as encoding problems which occur when using sign language. An additional explanation could be that teachers who used total communication also had different perceptions of the input needs of deaf children than did the auditory-oral teachers. In teacher interviews which followed the tasks, teachers discussed information which suggested both of these influences. The finding of no difference in talk to hearing and to auditory-oral deaf children can also be interpreted in two ways. It may be that teachers of auditory-oral deaf children and teachers of hearing children perceived their children's language learning needs in similar ways. Of it may be that they hold different perceptions, each leading to the use of similar behaviors. For example, auditory-oral teachers may feel that their children do not understand portions of the language they use, but hope to challenge the children to eventually understand and use this language. Teachers talking to hearing children may be much less aware of their children's language learning needs. This idea also seemed to be supported by the teacher interviews.

The difference between total communication and auditory-oral groups was even more pronounced when examining the sign language portion of the idiomatic language. Only 38% of those expressions which were used were signed completely.

Comparisons between auditory-oral and total communication groups' encoding of indirect requests revealed no differences in the oral portion of their language. However, only 55% of the signed portion of indirect requests could be considered complete enough to retain the ambiguous syntactic structure which made the utterance nonliteral.

The ultimate question of concern about the accommodations to which deaf children are exposed must be: What difference do they make? We cannot say, for example,

that using more nonliteral language to children is better. Insufficient accommodation may lead to slower acquisition. On the other hand, teachers may be overcompensating in their attempt to make these structures available, and thereby depriving children of the data they might use to acquire language more rapidly. We know that language learning consists of the meeting of environmental data and the child's cognitive processing abilities. Any child with competent mental processes can apply these strategies to environmental data to which he has access. In the case of the deaf child, mental capacity is not deficient. The language learning problem is one of lack of access to the data which must be learned. Although accommodations may at times facilitate the acquisition of language, they may also impede acquisition by depriving the child of sufficient access to the data he needs for learning the language.

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